



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 4 Year B

#### What's the Question?

[RCL] Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

“If this is the answer, then what is the question?” Have you ever wondered that about something?

Jesus often asks questions without providing answers: “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” “Who do you say I am?” “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”

Anytime we read Paul’s letters, though, it’s the reverse. We have answers, but not questions. We need to ask, “If this is the answer, then what is the question?” for we only have Paul’s response to a letter or a circumstance. We do not have any of the original context which prompts his response.

It’s sort of like playing the TV game *Jeopardy*. The answer is given; what is the question? And this is the pattern we encounter this morning in our reading from 1 Corinthians.

The question this morning seems to be whether one may eat meat sacrificed to idols. And Paul responds. Paul also addresses this topic in his Letter to the Romans, so we know that the eating of meat sacrificed to idols was a wide-ranging concern within the early Christian community.

This is a question about food, particularly meat. In a variety of ways, food was associated with pagan ritual, either in the course of a social or public event in the temple or the home, or later, for sale in the market. Apparently, there was some concern within the Christian community about eating what had been sacrificed to pagan gods. Some, either secure in their faith or “puffed up” with knowledge, as Paul puts it, readily ate the meat available, whatever its pedigree. Still others had difficulty separating their faith in Christ Jesus from the pagan sacrifices of their culture, and were confused in their understanding.

Paul tells the Christians in Corinth to sit up! Pay attention! Take a closer look! Paul tells those Christians that they’re focused on the wrong thing. To eat – or not to eat – that is not the question!

So we’re back to questions and answers again.

We have an answer in Paul’s writing. What is the question?

The truth is, there is no single question formulated in a neat and tidy package, but whatever the Corinthians were troubled about, eating meat was just the presenting issue. The real concern had more to

do with *freedom*, and *responsibility*, and *rights*. The real question wasn't so much about eating meat, as about principles and people. At its heart, it was a question about love.

There is a difference between doing what we imagine is good and right and doing what we imagine we have a right to do.

Do you remember Jonah of big whale fame? Just like in the story of Jonah, Paul is talking to the Christians at Corinth of the conflict between *principles* and *people*.

“I can eat meat sacrificed to idols because I know that the idols aren't real.” “I have a right to eat the meat if I want to and it doesn't do any harm.”

Have you heard this kind of language about rights and wiggle room? Some of those in Corinth took these positions, and certainly from a legal standpoint—even a standpoint of religious right and wrong—they were correct in their thinking.

Paul agrees: “We know that ‘all of us possess knowledge’ that ‘no idol in the world really exists’ and ...we are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do...” Paul argues against any kind of legalism that puts the rule first—for the sake of the rule itself—and people and consequences second.

But there is more than one way of forgetting God in one's religious zeal. The Corinthians were a headstrong lot in a very diverse community and they were apparently quite determined to hold to their rights as Christians and as free citizens. Trouble is, in doing so, they put principles before people, substituting rules for responsibility.

Rules can be important in establishing a community's identity. One example of how biblical rules get lived out is in the dress codes of Orthodox Jews. Have you ever observed Orthodox Jews in an airport? The men are quite noticeable with their giant black hats and long black coats. Orthodox Jews are faithful in living out the rules of their religious beliefs, and this includes the way they dress.

We tend to take a more flexible, relaxed approach to some biblical rules. As Episcopalians, we've thrown out some rules, or been selective in choosing ones to support our positions. Few among us practice Levirate marriage, for example, where a woman, upon her husband's death, marries his brother. We don't go break a neighbor's window if ours is accidentally broken. And we don't pluck out our eye when we see something offensive.

Since we are sometimes not very good with rules, we're also often confused about responsibility. Maybe we've thrown out the baby with the bathwater!

One of the earliest lessons of the Old Testament, what God has been trying to get across to generations of willful people and what the “show and tell” of God in Christ came finally to demonstrate is found in the story of Cain and Abel. Remember that in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, Cain kills Abel. God knows this and asks Cain: “Where is your brother?” Cain replies, “I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?”

The point is made quite clearly that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We share responsibility for each other in Christ Jesus and in Christian community. Paul and his opponents in Corinth differ not simply about meat and who should eat what under which circumstances. Paul, in writing to the Christian

community in Corinth, addresses the issue of meat, yes. But more deeply, and more to the point, he talks about the meaning of freedom. Of Christian freedom. And Paul frames this in the context of Christian community.

Christian freedom isn't so much of *rights* as *responsibilities*.  
Christian freedom isn't so much of *principles* as *people*.

Paul says food will not commend us to God. Knowledge puffs us up. It is love that builds us up, and in love, Paul counsels the Corinthians to take care lest their understanding of liberty become a stumbling block to the weak.

The God who is our source and goal, and Jesus Christ who lived among us and prepares a place for us, are more interested in our sisters and our brothers than in legalistic principles. The message of Paul underscores Jesus' message of love: our relationships are more important than our rules. Freedom is not a matter of our rights, but of our neighbor's needs.

When Jesus casts out an unclean spirit in today's gospel lesson, he casts out that which separates a person from God, that which emphasizes knowledge and principle. Be sure to notice how painful it is when the unclean spirit comes out of him!

Rules are easy. We know what they are and can dress accordingly, act accordingly, eat accordingly. Freedom, the freedom that Christ brings, the liberty born of God's love for us, is a harder thing to live.

So, back to the beginning. Without knowing the *question*, we can read Paul's answer to the Corinthian community. *People matter. Responsibilities bind us.*

Still, there are some critical questions that come out of this, questions for each of us to ask ourselves and to hold in mind:

Am I not an apostle?

Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?

Am I not free?

*The Rev. Macbrina Blasdell teaches religious studies courses online for Park University, with her greatest interest following the development and idiosyncrasies of religion in today's world. She enjoys time with her family, a number of cats and many roses, and delights in working with dark chocolate.*